

# ROBERTS PROJECTS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
January 6, 2023



## **Kehinde Wiley: Colorful Realm**

January 21 – April 8, 2023

Public Opening Reception Saturday, January 21st, 6-8pm

Kehinde Wiley  
*Portrait of John Adewumi, 2023*  
Oil on linen  
96 x 72 in (243.8 x 182.9 cm)

Roberts Projects is delighted to announce *Colorful Realm*, an exhibition of new work from renowned contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley. Drawing inspiration from Japanese nature paintings of the Edo period (c.1600–1868), Wiley parallels traditional techniques and materials in nine monumental paintings. Exposed linen highlights the depicted natural scenes while also preserving the delicate balance of the untouched picture space. Per the artist, “So much of my work is about appearance and showing up and being visible, and this dance between exploring the vastness of space within the minimality of this technique I found to be an interesting juxtaposition.”

In this new work, Wiley references famed Edo-period artists such as Kitagawa Utamaro, Kiyohara Yukinobu, and Utagawa Kunisada in his use of negative space in compositions that significantly advance his distinct visual lexicon. In the absence of something beside a single subject, the functional emptiness highlights the oneness of nature and the expansive scale of the natural world. The impact of these ideas echoes throughout. The focal point of each painting is the story itself, one that extends beyond a path that blends into the horizon, and the understanding of the narrative as a whole. Similarly, Itō Jakuchū’s renowned *Images of the Colorful Realm of Living Beings* (c. 1757-1766), of which this exhibition takes its title, embodies how the nature scenery is depicted and symbolized in Japanese art.

Panoramic displays of flora and fauna—both real and fantastical—are rendered in meticulous detail on raw silk in rich compositions that blur the boundary between painting and objects of devotion. Jakuchū’s virtuosity in capturing these details is noteworthy, as it provided considerable insight into the then-contemporary understanding of the relationship between nature and art.

Wiley broadens the political context of the divine subject, as admired by an Edo audience, by exploring painting’s role in communicating power, ritual, and performativity, and how this dialogue can shift historical memory by both incorporating and monumentalizing Black and brown men and women in art historical spaces not accustomed to their presence.

The mid-Edo period saw the rapid growth of an urban culture, due in part to the movement of artists between rural to inner-city locales, and an expansion of both literary and artistic practices, including painting, woodblock prints, ceramics, lacquer, and textiles. This period

also saw the growing influence of different cultural markers, specifically Chinese and Western art, newly reflected within Japanese aesthetic principles. In Wiley's reinterpretation of the Edo period's visual vocabulary, the overlapping relationships are decidedly more global. Per Wiley, "This series has developed over a number of years and has involved models from different stages of my life. You'll find models from New York, West Africa, and from Europe. This exhibition is an opportunity to picture some of my favorite subjects within one body of work."

With this new series, Wiley recontextualizes the naturalist landscape genre from a non-Western perspective, activating different historical memories and therefore different ways of thinking about man's relationship to nature. Generally removed from any narrative content, he re-presents the landscape as one with intersecting cultural, social, and artistic discourses. The aesthetic principles of his practice—portraits defined by their dramatic realism set against dynamic backgrounds—have expanded to incorporate a heightened appreciation for the natural world. The rigidly structured English William Morris-style, as featured in Wiley's celebrated series *The Yellow Wallpaper* (2020), has given way to a more organic aesthetic expression. The overall effect, in its looseness and beguiling simplicity, is more subtle, more sensitive yet more complex when seen as a whole.

In both subject matter and execution, these new works are also notable in how they emphasize a dimensional space with no end, one that extends beyond the limits of the painting itself. Wiley's use of bold outlines and almost flat regions of color contrasts against the near blankness of exposed raw linen, which becomes less of a color than a suggestion, or tone. The empty spaces connect intertwining leaves and flowers, and separate yet link figures. In these paintings, Wiley creates presence in the physicality of absence, and this conception of spatiality and space centers around not only on space itself, but on temporality, relations, negation, and negotiation. It is in this void, untied to any specific time or space, where different people, places, and experiences can be found and converge, without resistance or boundaries.

To clarify what he describes as a "divine void," in these paintings, Wiley proposes his act of painting as one of refusal. His suspension of the figure in a sort of self-described "fabulous vacuum," where they previously existed in a purely decorative environment, espouses an intimacy that is provocative without being exploitive. In this space, his subjects achieve a type of joy, a type of freedom, and finally, a type of impossibility. It is a state of being that is in direct opposition to the reality of how Black and brown bodies exist in contemporary American society: surviving the paucity of access to both natural and societal resources that is deliberate, cumulative, and systemic. Per Wiley, "In this new turn, I'm trying to break open this conversation again towards what nature really means in the 21st century, in an era of widespread ecological disasters. Our relationship with nature is increasingly in a perilous position. It invites a reinterpretation of not only an incredible opportunity to explore the vastness and the beauty of nature, but also the astonishing fragility and sadness that surrounds us, and lost opportunities."

*Colorful Realm* is the artist's sixth solo exhibition with Roberts Projects and is the inaugural show at the gallery's new Mid-Wilshire Los Angeles space.

In conjunction with the exhibition, an extensively illustrated catalogue will be published by Roberts Projects in 2023.

## About the Artist

Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977, Los Angeles) is an American artist best known for his portraits that render people of color in the traditional settings of Old Master paintings. Wiley's work brings art history face-to-face with contemporary culture, using the visual rhetoric of the heroic, the powerful, the majestic and the sublime to celebrate Black and brown people the artist has met throughout the world. Working in the mediums of painting, sculpture, and video, Wiley's portraits challenge and reorient art-historical narratives, awakening complex issues that many would prefer to remain muted.

In Summer 2023, a monumental bronze sculpture will be unveiled at Sankofa Park, commissioned by Destination Crenshaw, Los Angeles.

Recent exhibitions include *Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence*, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, Italy, a collateral event of the 59th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia (2022); *Kehinde Wiley: The Prelude*, The National Gallery, London, England (2022). In 2021, The Huntington Library commissioned Wiley to create a new painting inspired by Thomas Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy* (ca. 1770). *A Portrait of a Young Gentleman* (also the original title of the Gainsborough painting) is now in The Huntington's permanent collection. In 2018, Wiley became the first African American artist to paint an official U.S. Presidential portrait for the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Former U.S. President Barack Obama selected Wiley for this honor. In 2019, Wiley founded Black Rock Senegal, a multidisciplinary artist-in-residence program that invites artists from around the world to live and create work in Dakar, Senegal. Wiley is the recipient of the U.S. Department of State's Medal of Arts, Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Medal, and France's Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters). He holds a BFA from San Francisco Art Institute, an MFA from Yale University, and honorary doctorates from the Rhode Island School of Design and San Francisco Art Institute. He has held solo exhibitions throughout the United States and internationally and his works are included in the collections of over 50 public institutions around the world. He lives and works in Beijing, Dakar, and New York.

## ROBERTS PROJECTS NEW LOCATION *as of January 1, 2023*

442 South La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90036  
(323) 549-0223

Roberts Projects is located in the Mid-Wilshire district of Los Angeles, two blocks north of Wilshire Boulevard. A private parking lot is adjacent to the building.

Gallery hours are Tuesday – Saturday, 11:00am – 6:00pm and by appointment.

For additional information, please contact Mary Skarbek: 323.549.0223 and [mary@robertsprojectsla.com](mailto:mary@robertsprojectsla.com)

## PRESS INQUIRIES

For press inquiries, please contact Hannah Gottlieb-Graham, ALMA Communications [hannah@almacommunications.co](mailto:hannah@almacommunications.co)